

Tullett Prebon Research, a blog by Dr Tim Morgan

Of pots, kettles and the tax on Carrs

by Tim Morgan on July 1, 2012

Until David Cameron commented on his tax affairs, I'd never heard of Jimmy Carr. Even now, I've only heard one of his gags. You probably know the gag I'm talking about – it's the one in which Carr castigates Barclays for avoiding tax.....

Few will approve of the means by which Carr (and others like him) seek to avoid most of their tax liabilities. But there's something about this incident which is even more disturbing than tax avoidance. It's the spectacle of a prime minister lecturing us on morality.

It's no coincidence that the House of Commons is equipped with a despatch box, not a pulpit. This distinction, one which clearly was lost on Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, now seems to have eluded Cameron (and George Osborne) as well.

If I take my car to a garage, I want the mechanic to repair the vehicle, not treat me to a lecture on driving less aggressively. We elect ministers to manage our economic and fiscal affairs, not to harangue us – collectively, let alone individually – on our morals.

The burden of Cameron's homily seems to be that everyone has a duty to pay his or her tax in full, because it's tax revenue that pays for social benefits. Social goods, that is, like hospitals. And schools. And invading Iraq. And creating hugely elaborate surveillance systems. Which is more harmful to society – Jimmy Carr's tax affairs, or the bombing of Baghdad?

As I've explained [before](#), the real problem is that Britain's tax code, having swelled from 5,000 to almost 12,000 pages since 1997, is the most complicated in the world. This is why, at a time when the focus should surely be on growth, jobs and debt, the national debate has concentrated instead on the ambient temperature of pasties.

If it's right that taxpayers should desist from dodging taxes, it's equally true that politicians should desist from indulging in complication. Perhaps ministers could reflect on that – and on the tale of the pot and the kettle?

Perhaps they'll get time to do this reflection in flight, the next time they leave double-dip, debt-mired Britain to lecture the Eurozone countries on how to get their act together.

Or, to put it another way, before addressing sermons at taxpayers or at foreigners, put your own duck-house in order first.